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THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO, 1847–1848[1]

During the last eighteen months, few students of our history can have failed to be struck with the points of similarity between some of the aspects and incidents of our recent public policy and some of the phases of the Mexican War. Not only in broad outlines is there a resemblance between the two situations, but it exists even in details. What a curious coincidence that in the one case we should have assisted the exiled Santa Anna to return to Mexico, counting on his friendly aid in attaining our demands, and that in the other the exiled Aguinaldo should have been brought home and his followers equipped as our allies! Indeed let any one who thinks this comparison forced read over his *Biglow Papers*. The famous epistle of Birdofreedom Sawin from Mexico echoes with contemporaneous discussion, and one long passage, with two or three changes in the names, might well serve the Anti-Imperialists as a tract for the times.

But it is not my purpose on this occasion to follow out in detail the comparison between the two wars and the issues arising from them, but rather, in view of the present persistent asseveration that the victory in Manila Bay imposed upon the United States at once the duty and the necessity of securing and retaining the Philippines, to inquire how we escaped annexing all of Mexico in 1848. This relic of New Spain, less populous than our antipodal islands, contiguous to our territory, a political wreck from the incessant turmoil of a generation, in the complete possession of our armies for months, with the flag flying from the "Halls of the Montezumas," was finally relinquished, although the situation presented every argument urged for the retention of the Philippines more cogently, and annexation would have involved fewer social, political and constitutional difficulties. In the light of present events and of current opinion it is hardly credible that, if confronted to-day by that situation, our people would avoid their duty and leave the conquered to work out their own salvation merely disburdened of some undeveloped territory.

That a policy so alien to our present ideas should have prevailed only a half-century ago invites some explanation in addition

[1] Read at the meeting of the American Historical Association at Cambridge, Mass., December 29, 1899.

to the obvious one that expansion and the extension of human slavery were, in the minds of an increasing number, inextricably bound together, and that therefore the deepening moral abhorrence of slavery, which was taking fast hold of the idealists, re-enforced the opposition of conservatism. As a consequence just that idealist element which, to-day, leads the movement for expansion under the banner of political altruism, shrank back fifty years ago from having anything to do with it.

It is to offer some further explanation beyond this obvious one that I undertake a brief inquiry into the rise, diffusion and probable strength of a desire to acquire all of Mexico. For such an inquiry will show that the movement for expansion, although associated in the minds of many people with the extension of slavery, was by no means identical with it, being on the one hand strongly opposed by some of the ablest champions of the institution and on the other hand ardently advocated by its enemies, while the body of its support was in no inconsiderable degree made up of men on the whole indifferent to the slavery question. The emergence of this expansionist movement at this time in spite of the obstacles to its success prepares us for its triumphant career at the present day, when it has no substantial hindrance save the conservative spirit, to whose objections our sanguine people are wont to pay little attention.

It is well known that President Polk on assuming office announced to George Bancroft that he proposed during his term to settle the Oregon question and to acquire California.[1] He is, I think, with the possible exception of Grant, the only president who has entered office with a positive and definite policy of expansion. Polk was in fact an expansionist, not at the behest of slavery as has been charged, but for the cause itself; yet a prudent expansionist, for he hesitated at the incorporation of large masses of alien people, refusing to countenance, as we shall see, the all-of-Mexico movement and yielding only in the case of the proposed purchase of Cuba. To accomplish his purpose in regard to California, when negotiations failed, President Polk was ready to try conquest and he welcomed, if he did not provoke, the war with Mexico.[2] The conquest of sparsely settled California and New Mexico was easily accomplished. The resistance of Mexico, although more desperate than was expected, was not effectual and in April, 1847, Mr. Trist was despatched with the project of a

[1] Schouler's *History of the United States*, IV. 498.

[2] Compare the narrative in Schouler's *Historical Briefs*, 149–151, which is a faithful presentation in brief of the material contained in Polk's diary.

treaty. Our commissioner was authorized to offer peace on the cession of all territory east of the Rio Grande from its mouth to the southern boundary of New Mexico, New Mexico, Upper and Lower California and a right of way across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. "The boundary of the Rio Grande, and the cession to the United States of New Mexico and Upper California constituted an ultimatum," and less than that was under no circumstances to be accepted. The refusal of these terms was followed in September by the capture of the City of Mexico. The news of this triumph of the American arms which reached Washington late in October soon gave rise to an active agitation to incorporate all of Mexico into the Union.[1] The opponents of the administration averred this to be the design of the President, although it was not, and the suspicion was increased by the known fact that the Secretary of the Treasury, Robert J. Walker, was an advocate of this policy.[2]

Inasmuch as President Polk initiated his own policy and resolutely and independently pursued his own plans, no account of his presidency can be satisfactory to-day, which is not based on a careful examination of the voluminous diary[3] in whose pages are recorded not only his own views and intentions but also brief reports of cabinet meetings and of conferences with party leaders. Turning to this record we find that Polk told his cabinet, September 4, 1847, that if the war was still further prolonged he would "be unwilling to pay the sum which Mr. Trist had been authorized to pay," in the settlement of a boundary, by which it was contemplated that the United States would acquire New Mexico and the Californias; and that "if Mexico continued obstinately to refuse to treat, I was decidedly in favor of insisting on more territory than the provinces named." The question was discussed by the cabinet on September 7, and Secretary Walker and Attorney-General Clifford are recorded as "in favour of acquiring in addition the department or state of Tamaulipas, which includes the port of Tampico." Secretary Buchanan, the Postmaster-General and Secretary John Y. Mason opposed this proposition. The President declared himself "as being in favour of acquiring the cession of the Depart-

[1] Cf. Von Holst, III. 341–344. It will be noticed that Von Holst, not having access to Polk's diary, worked in the dark in regard to the President's Mexican policy and attributes designs to him which he did not entertain. The New York *Sun* asserted in October that it had advocated the occupation of Mexico in May. Niles, LXXIII. 113.

[2] *Baltimore American* in Niles, LXXIII. 113.

[3] George Bancroft's typewritten copy of the MS. of the diary is among the Bancroft Papers in the Lenox Library. For an account of the diary see Schouler, *Historical Briefs*, 121–124. I may take the occasion here to express my appreciation of the courtesy of Mr. Eames and Mr. Paltsits in giving me every facility in the examination of the diary and correspondence of Polk.

ment of Tamaulipas, if it should be found practicable." Clifford proposed the recall of Trist and the prosecution of the war with the greatest vigor until Mexico should sue for peace. This was approved by Walker and by the President except as regards the recall of Trist. A month later he changed his mind and Trist was recalled, as he notes, October 5, "because his remaining longer with the army could not probably accomplish the objects of his mission, and because his remaining longer might and probably would impress the Mexican government with the belief that the United States were so anxious for peace, that they would ultimate (*sic*) conclude one on the Mexican terms. Mexico must now sue for peace and when she does we will hear her propositions."

Another month passes and Secretary Buchanan has shifted his position, presumably in response to some indications of a changing public sentiment, such as the recent Democratic victory in Pennsylvania, and we are not surprised to learn that he "spoke in an unsettled tone" and "would express no opinion between these two plans," *i. e.*, for the President in his message "to designate the part of Mexican territory, which we intended to hold as an indemnity, or to occupy all Mexico, by a largely increased force, and subdue the country and promise protection to the inhabitants." Buchanan would, so Polk gathered from his utterances, favor the acquisition of Tamaulipas and the country east of the Sierra Madre Mountains and withdraw the troops to that line. This in fact Buchanan announced to the President nearly two months later, January 2. "My views," records the President, November 9, "were in substance that we would continue the prosecution of the war with an increased force, hold all the country we had conquered, or might conquer, and levy contributions upon the enemy to support the war, until a just peace was obtained, that we must have indemnity in territory, and that as a part indemnity, the Californias and New Mexico should under no circumstances be restored to Mexico, but that they should henceforward be considered a part of the United States and permanent territorial governments be established over them; and that if Mexico protracted the war additional territory must be acquired as further indemnity."

He adds in regard to Buchanan: "His change of opinion will not alter my views; I am fixed in my course, and I think all in the Cabinet except Mr. Buchanan still concur with me, and he may yet do so."

On November 18, Polk requested Buchanan to prepare a paragraph for the message to the effect: "That failing to obtain a peace, we should continue to occupy Mexico with our troops and

encourage and protect the friends of peace in Mexico to establish and maintain a Republican Government, able and willing to make peace." By this time Buchanan had come into an agreement with the President, and on the 20th, the cabinet all agreed that such a declaration should be inserted in the message. But if peace could not be obtained by this means the question was as to the next step. "In Mr. Buchanan's draft, he stated in that event that 'we must fulfill that destiny which Providence may have in store for both countries.'"

Experience warns us, when a statesman proposes humble submission to the leadings of Providence, that he is listening anxiously and intently to the voice of the people. President Polk was too independent a man to get his divine guidance by those channels and announced to his cabinet: "I thought this would be too indefinite and that it would be avoiding my constitutional responsibility. I preferred to state in substance, that we should in that event, take the measure of our indemnity into our own hands, and dictate our own terms to Mexico."

Yet all the cabinet except Clifford preferred with Buchanan to follow whither destiny should lead.[1] The paragraph was still troublesome, and Polk presented a third draft to the cabinet, November 23. "Mr. Buchanan," records the diary, "still preferred his own draft, and so did Mr. Walker, the latter avowing as a reason, that he was for taking the whole of Mexico, if necessary, and he thought the construction placed upon Mr. Buchanan's draft by a large majority of the people, would be that it looked to that object."

Polk's answer does him honor: "I replied that I was not prepared to go to that extent; and furthermore, that I did not desire that anything I said in the message should be so obscure as to give rise to doubt or discussion as to what my true meaning was; that I had in my last message declared that I did not contemplate the conquest of Mexico. And that in another part of this paper I had said the same thing."

It will be noticed that on this occasion Robert J. Walker comes out squarely for all of Mexico. He seems to have improved the occasion again in his Treasury report to express his views, but the President required that to be in harmony with the message. Perhaps it will not be superfluous to remark that the most advanced expansionist in Polk's cabinet always had been an expansionist, was opposed to slavery, although a Southerner by adoption, and was during the Civil War a strong Union man.

[1] It is interesting to note that Buchanan used this rejected paragraph in a letter to a democratic meeting in Philadelphia. Von Holst, III. 341 n.

Twice later this crucial paragraph was revised. In its final form it read: "If we shall ultimately fail [*i. e.*, to secure peace], then we shall have exhausted all honorable means in pursuit of peace, and must continue to occupy her country with our troops, taking the full measure of indemnity into our own hands, and must enforce the terms which our honor demands."[1] An earlier passage, however, in explicit terms renounced the "all-of-Mexico" policy in these words: "It has never been contemplated by me, as an object of the war, to make a permanent conquest of the Republic of Mexico, or to annihilate her separate existence as an independent nation."[2]

The opening of Congress gave an opportunity for the rising feeling for all of Mexico to show its strength. Yet it must not be forgotten that the new House had been elected over a year earlier, when the opposition to the war was perhaps at its height and not yet counterbalanced by the excitement of the victories of 1847. During the first weeks of the session many series of resolutions in favor of and against the policy of all-of-Mexico were presented. Several of the latter were offered by Southern Whigs like Botts of Virginia and Toombs of Georgia, and illustrate the point that the slavery and expansion interests were not identical. Similarly, as Calhoun made the ablest speech against the absorption of Mexico, so the most outspoken advocates of it were Senator Dickinson of New York, a Hunker Democrat, and Senator Hannegan of Indiana. Hannegan offered the following resolution January 10: "That it may become necessary and proper, as it is within the constitutional capacity of this government, for the United States to hold Mexico as a territorial appendage."[3] Senator Dickinson, who at the Jackson dinner on the 8th had offered the toast "A More Perfect Union embracing the entire North American Continent,"[4] on the 12th made a speech in the Senate advocating expansion, in which he declared for all of Mexico and asserted that it was our destiny to embrace all of North America. "Neither national justice," said he, "nor national morality requires us tamely to surrender our Mexican conquests, nor should such be the policy of the government if it would advance the cause of national freedom or secure its enjoyment to the people of Mexico."

Calhoun at the earliest opportunity, December 15, had offered these trenchant resolutions: "that to conquer Mexico or to hold it either as a province or to incorporate it in the Union would be

[1] Niles *Register*, LXXIII. 230.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Session, p. 136.
[4] Niles, *Register*, LXXIII. 336.

inconsistent with the avowed object for which the war has been prosecuted; a departure from the settled policy of the government; in conflict with its character and genius, and in the end subversive of our free and popular institutions."[1]

These resolutions drew from Cass a few days later the wonderful assertion that "there is no man in this nation in favor of the extinction of the Nationality of Mexico." Whereupon Calhoun rejoined: "Why, you can hardly read a newspaper without finding it filled with speculation upon this subject. The proceedings that took place in Ohio at a dinner given to one of the volunteer officers of the army returned from Mexico show conclusively that the impression entertained by the persons present was, that our troops would never leave Mexico until they had conquered the whole country. This was the sentiment advanced by the officer and it was applauded by the assembly, and endorsed by the official paper of that State."[2]

Calhoun put the case even more strongly in his speech in the Senate, January 4: "There was at that time [*i. e.*, at the beginning of the session] a party scattered all over every portion of the country in favor of conquering the whole of Mexico. To prove that such was the case, it is only necessary to refer to the proceedings of numerous large public meetings, to declarations repeatedly made in the public journals, and to the opinions expressed by the officers of the army and individuals of standing and influence, to say nothing of declarations made here and in the other House of Congress."[3] Some of these expressions may be briefly noticed. General John A. Quitman, one of the most energetic of the army officers, subsequently a persistent advocate of the acquisition of Cuba, arrived in Washington in December and presented a plan to the President for a permanent occupation of Mexico.[4] Commodore Stockton, the Dewey of the conquest of California, at a great dinner given in his honor the 30th of December, advocated not the annexation but the occupation of Mexico until that people should be completely regenerated, and would accept civil and religious liberty and maintain a genuine republic.[5] Among the newspapers advocating the retention of all of Mexico we find, strange as it seems, the *New York Evening Post*, with such language as this: "Now we ask whether any man can coolly contemplate the idea of recalling our troops

[1] *Cong. Globe*, p. 26.

[2] *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., *ibid.*, p. 54.

[3] Quoted by Von Holst, III. 343. *Cf.* Niles, *Register*, LXXIII. 334. A writer in the *Charleston Courier* affirmed: "Most of the leading Democratic papers openly advocate that policy." Niles, LXXIII. 354.

[4] Claiborne's *Quitman*, II. 79.

[5] Niles, *Register*, LXXIII., 335.

from the territory we at present occupy, from Mexico—from San Juan de Ulloa—from Monterey—from Puebla—and thus by one stroke of a secretary's pen, resign this beautiful country to the custody of the ignorant cowards and profligate ruffians who have ruled it the last twenty-five years. Why, humanity cries out against it. Civilization and Christianity protest against this reflux of the tide o barbarism and anarchy."[1]

The *National Era*, the organ of anti-slavery, advocated the absorption of Mexico by the admission to the Union of individual Mexican states as fast as they should apply. The disrupted condition of Mexico favored this solution.[2]

In New York the Hunker Democrats came out strongly. The "Address to the Democracy of New York" unanimously adopted by the Syracuse Convention explains that as the purpose of the occupation of Mexico is to advance human rights such occupation is miscalled a conquest. "It is no more than the restoration of moral rights by legal means." The field for such a work is "opened to us by the conduct of Mexico, and such moral and legal means are offered for our use. Shall we occupy it? Shall we now run with manly vigor the race that is set before us? Or shall we yield to the suggestions of a sickly fanaticism, or sink into an enervating slumber? . . . We feel no emotion but pity for those whose philanthropy, or patriotism, or religion, has led them to believe that they can prescribe a better course of duty than that of the God who made us all."[3]

January 12, Senator Rusk of Texas called on the President to request him not to commit himself further against the annexation of all of Mexico. Polk told him that his views had been distinctly stated in his message and that his mind had not changed.

As in our own day foreign pressure in this direction was not lacking. More than a year earlier Bancroft wrote Buchanan from London: "People are beginning to say that it would be a blessing to the world if the United States would assume the tutelage of Mexico."[4] Rumors, too, were current of a rising annexationist party in Mexico.[5]

[1] Quoted in Niles, *Register*, LXXIII. 334, in article on "Manifest Destiny."

[2] The *National Era*, August 19, 1847. The article fills three and one-half columns. The plan was presented again February 3, 1848. As these Mexican accessions would probably have preserved their non-slaveholding character, the number of free states would have been immensely reinforced by any such proceeding.

[3] Niles, *Register*, LXXIII. 391.

[4] G. T. Curtis's *Buchanan*, I. 576. In this connection it is interesting to compare the forecast, at a somewhat later date, of Alexander von Humboldt: "Die Vereinigten Staaten werden ganz Mexico an sich reissen und dann selbst zerfallen." Roscher, *Kolonien, Kolonialpolitik und Auswanderung*, p. 177.

[5] *Cf.* the citation by Von Holst, III. 342, from Hodgson's *Cradle of the Confederacy*, 251–252, in regard to the annexation party in Mexico. Hodgson's estimate, however, must be greatly exaggerated.

The foregoing all show that the agitation for "all of Mexico" was well started and needed only time to become really formidable. It was deprived of that requisite element of time by the astonishing course of Trist, who despite his recall still lingered with Scott's army and finally negotiated a treaty on the lines of Polk's ultimatum. How this conduct struck the President can best be told in his own words. When he hears, January 4, that Trist has renewed negotiations he says: "This information is most surprising. Mr. T. has acknowledged the receipt of his letter of recall, and he possesses no diplomatic powers. He is acting no doubt upon General Scott's advice. He has become the perfect tool of Scott. He is in this measure defying the authority of his government. . . . He may, I fear, greatly embarrass the government." On the 15th came a long despatch from Trist, which Polk declares "the most extraordinary document I have ever heard from a Diplomatic Representative. His dispatch is arrogant, impudent, and very insulting to his government and was personally offensive to the President. He admits he is acting without authority and in violation of the positive order recalling him. It is manifest to me that he has become the tool of General Scott and his menial instrument, and that the paper was written at Scott's instance and dictation. I have never in my life felt so indignant, and the whole Cabinet expressed themselves as I felt."

Buchanan was directed to prepare a stern rebuke to Trist and Marcy to write Scott to order him to leave the headquarters of the Army.

January 23, Senators Cass and Sevier advised the President to inform the Mexican government that Trist had been recalled. The next day Buchanan thought such a letter proper if Polk had made up his mind to reject the treaty. This Buchanan thought should be done. Polk said he could not decide till he saw the treaty. On the 25th the question was put before the cabinet. Walker agreed with Buchanan. In regard to the treaty Polk said that if "unembarrassed" he "would not now approve such a treaty," but was now in doubt about his duty. Buchanan still favored rejection, while Marcy was in favor of approval if the treaty were on the lines of the ultimatum, and John Y. Mason took sides with Marcy. It was finally decided on the 28th to despatch the letter to the Mexican government. The next entry of importance records the arrival of the treaty after nightfall, February 19. Polk found it within Trist's original instructions as regards boundary limits and thought that it should be judged on its merits and not prejudiced by Trist's bad conduct. The next evening, Sunday, the cabinet discussed the

treaty. Buchanan and Walker advised its rejection. Mason, Marcy, Johnson and Clifford favored its acceptance. Buchanan announced that he "wanted more territory and would not be content with less than the lines of Sierra Madre in addition to the Provinces secured in this treaty." Polk reminded Buchanan of his entire change of position during the war and adds in his diary that he believed the true reason of Buchanan's course to be that he was a candidate for the presidency. If the treaty were well received he would not be injured, if opposed he could say that he opposed it.

February 21, the President made known his decision to the cabinet: "That under all the circumstances of the case, I would submit it to the Senate for ratification, with a recommendation to strike out the 10th Art. I assigned my reasons for this decision. They were briefly, that the Treaty conformed on the main question of limits and boundary to the instructions given Mr. Trist in April last —and that though if the Treaty was now to be made, I should demand more, perhaps to make the Sierra Madre the line, yet it was doubtful whether this could be ever obtained by the consent of Mexico. I looked to the consequences of its rejection. A majority of one branch of Congress is opposed to my administration; they have falsely charged that the war was brought on and is continued by me, with a view to the conquest of Mexico, and if I were now to reject a Treaty made upon my own terms as authorized in April last, with the unanimous approbation of the Cabinet, the probability is, that Congress would not grant either men or money to prosecute the war. Should this be the result, the army now in Mexico would be constantly wasting and diminishing in numbers, and I might at last be compelled to withdraw them, and then lose the two provinces of New Mexico and Upper California which were ceded to us by this Treaty. Should the opponents of my administration succeed in carrying the next Presidential election, the great probability is that the country would lose all the advantages secured by this Treaty. I adverted to the immense value of Upper California, and concluded by saying that if I were now to reject my own terms as offered in April last, I did not see how it was possible for my administration to be sustained."

The rumor soon spread in Washington that Buchanan and Walker were exerting their influence to have the treaty rejected. On the 28th Senator Sevier, the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, informs the President that the committee will recommend the rejection of the Treaty and advise sending a commission. The other members of the committee were Webster, Benton, Mangum and Hannegan. Polk declared his opinion unchanged

and expressed his belief that Webster's object was to defeat the treaty. Sevier said Webster wanted no territory beyond the Rio Grande, and Polk comments in his diary: "Extremes meet. Mr. Webster is *for no territory* and Mr. Hannegan is *for all Mexico*. Benton's position cannot be calculated." Polk concludes his entry with: "If the treaty in its present form is ratified, there will be added to the United States an immense Empire, the value of which twenty years hence it would be difficult to calculate." It was surely the irony of fate that the eyes of this resolute Augustus, enlarger of empire, were so soon closed in death and that he was not suffered to see in the consequences of his policy the fulfillment at once of the most dismal prognostications of its opponents and of his own confident prophecy.

For several days the treaty hung in the balance. On February 29, Polk records: "From what I learn, about a dozen Democrats will oppose it, most of them because they wish to acquire more territory than the line of the Rio Grande and the Provinces of New Mexico and Upper California will secure." On March 2, the outlook appeared more hopeful; on the third Benton and Webster are recorded as the leading opponents. The suspense came to an end, March 10, when the treaty was ratified at 10 P. M., 38 to 14, four senators not voting.

The reception of the treaty and its recommendation to the Senate clearly defined the position of the administration and tended to discourage the advocates of "all of Mexico." If Trist had returned as ordered and the war had been prolonged, we should probably have acquired more territory, but how much more is of course uncertain. Calhoun in his opposition realized that every delay in bringing the war to a close would strengthen the expansion party and complicate the situation in ways that would contribute to advance their cause. We can best realize the importance of the element of time in this matter and so appreciate the significance of Trist's unexpected action in securing a treaty if we remember how long it took after the battle of Manila Bay for the final policy of acquiring all the Philippines to be developed. Trist's treaty arrived about four months after the news of the capture of Mexico City and it was at least four months and a half after the battle of Manila Bay before the present administration decided to demand all of the Philippines. Nor must we forget in this comparison that the formation and expression of public opinion through the agency of the press proceeds to-day at a much more rapid pace than fifty years ago.

In conclusion, then, in answer to the question how we escaped

the annexation of all of Mexico in 1847–48 the following reasons may be assigned. The growing realization that territorial expansion and the extension of slavery were so inextricably involved with each other that every accession of territory would precipitate a slavery crisis powerfully counteracted the natural inclinations of the people toward expansion which are so clearly revealed to-day. The fact that the elections for the Congress that met in December, 1847, took place over a year earlier, before the great military victories of 1847 had begun to undermine the first revulsion from a war of conquest, gave the control of the House to the Whigs, who as a party were committed against the war and consequent annexations. Thirdly, there was the opposition of President Polk, who effectually controlled the policy of the government; and finally, the lack of time for the movement to gather sufficient headway to overcome these obstacles.

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